NYU GALLATIN SCHOOL OF INDIVIDUALIZED STUDY

ADVANCED FICTION WRITING

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Section WRTNG-UG 1555 Fall, 2013

Wednesdays, 6:20-9pm, room 737, Bobst Library
Office hours Wednesdays 4-6pm and by appointment,

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Course Description

Most good writing depends on some balance of concrete and abstract, and this workshop course will likewise balance inquiries into fiction’s grander theoretical questions with more mechanical considerations, such as how to apply dialogue, insert flashback material, and so on. Assignments will include outside essays and stories as well as occasional short exercises, but our primary focus will be student writing. Participants will be asked to read each others’ work rigorously, with an eye to precision, plausibility and art, but also generously. Remember that fiction itself has many goals, and your colleague across the table may be onto something ingenious and inspired, even if the work itself still needs development.

Objectives and Learning Goals

• Refinement of each student’s skill in the writing of fiction, with special attention to:
  Development/articulation of a personal vision, style and voice
  Increased understanding of the discipline’s conceptual underpinnings
  Further mastery of the fundamentals, from grammar and word usage to building blocks like action, dialogue and exposition.
• Exposure to texts on the craft of writing and to exemplary works of fiction, some by writers the student may not know well
• Development of active, thoughtful readership and a clear concise critical voice.

Required Texts

No texts need be purchased for this class. All readings will be posted on the NYU Classes website or distributed as handouts.

Required Assignments

• Two or three works of fiction to be submitted to the class for workshopping
• Weekly participation in the NYU Classes forums
• One page of helpful commentary on each submission by a fellow student, due on the day of workshopping
• Two short responses to public readings or literary events, one due at midterm and the second on our first December class
• Additional brief pieces to be assigned as needed, and possibly a short paper on some aspect of craft, due at midterm
• A final portfolio consisting of a revision of one of the workshopped stories plus a statement of revision and rewrites of any unsatisfactory work

Other requirements

• Prompt attendance at all classes (three absences will put the student at risk of failure)
• Participation in classroom discussions and timely completion of assignments

Basis for Final Grades

• Workshopped stories and revision, approximately 45%
• Responses on NYU Classes, 15%
• Written responses to fellow students, 20%
• Class participation, other exercises, midterm paper (if assigned), 20%
Gallatin Statement of Academic Integrity

"As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website (http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html)"

THE SPECIFICS

I. WRITING

Two or three times during the term you will present a work of fiction to the group, and these pieces will constitute your deepest, most serious writing for the course. For that reason, I advise you to spend some time each week working independently, rather than cobbling together a story the night before it’s due. This is not to say that I expect your stories to be flawless; most of what we consider will be honorably in progress. But I’d like you to be able to stand behind your submissions. To that end, a few fundamentals:

Most student stories will be between 10 and 20 pages, though obviously page length is incidental to quality. If a story is substantially less than 10 pages, take a minute to ask yourself if you’ve truly developed your idea or just sketched out a scene. Students who are purposely working very short may submit two pieces simultaneously if they like, though this is not required.

Conversely, if your work is over 30 pages, ask yourself if it truly needs that length to reach its destination. Some stories do, and while I have no objection to our considering long stories, if everyone turns in superlong material we may have to readdress the reading load.

It’s essential that you do us the courtesy of proofreading your work before you pass it out. I recommend printing out a hard copy for this, rather than attempting to proofread onscreen. More about editing techniques as the course progresses, but sloppy manuscripts will earn my ire and the ire of your classmates.

During the first class we’ll create a schedule for student submissions; distribution will be through the NYU Classes system. With some leeway granted for the first week’s submissions, work should be available to your readers by noon on the Friday before it is to be discussed.

In addition, several shorter writing assignments will be required:

After reading each of your colleagues’ stories, please write a brief response to pass back to the student writer. One double-spaced page is sufficient, but think carefully about what you want to say, critique with care, and move beyond the obvious.

Note that I don’t expect you to compress everything about the work into a page. One or two smart points, offered thoughtfully, are preferable to a lot of diffuse blather. If you like, make notes on further points to be discussed in class.

Please e-mail these responses to me by noon on class days. (You must do this to receive credit.) Please also bring a hard copy to give to the author. You are encouraged to mark up the text and pass that back, too, if you like.

Most weeks there will be one additional reading assignment for which a short response is also required. (See below).

Often I’ll assign brief take-home or in-class writing assignments. Some of these are deceptively easy, but please take them seriously.
I may also assign a short paper on some aspect of craft, to be due at midterm. I’ll make a final decision on this after getting to know the students and their work.

Finally, I’d like you to attend two public readings of your own choosing and create a one-page reaction each time—taking the term reaction loosely. Your page may be a straight review or critique, a response in kind, a dramatic monologue, biting satire, tragic screenplay, lavish Broadway musical, or anything else you can dream up. These will be due at midterm and our first class in December.

Note:
It goes without saying that all writing you submit for this course must be your own. Likewise, responses to previously published essays and stories should be both your own words and your own ideas.
(An exception will be made for creative work that is metafictional or pointedly collaged out of found texts, but even in these cases the writer’s intention should be clear and the attributions made available to the reader.)
Speak to me if you have questions about this policy. The penalty for intentional plagiarism is failing the course (at my discretion).

II. READING

Most weeks, in addition to your colleagues’ work, a story or short essay will be assigned. Once you’ve read the assignment, please go to our NYU Classes site and post a brief response. Again, it’s not necessary to be comprehensive; a few sentences will suffice, and one trenchant, well written observation is preferable to a ramble that doesn’t go very deep. Post your comments by noon on the day we have class.

It’s axiomatic that writers and readers have plenty in common, but it’s not true that all writers are careful readers. For this class, especially, I feel you will grow if you develop your skills as an active, thoughtful reader, so here are some guidelines:

In reading your colleagues’ fiction, try thinking like a writer—that is, strategically. What choices has the author made, whether in the imagining of scenes and introduction of characters or in questions of style, form and diction? How are these choices serving the story? Try to be aware of each author’s successful decisions as well as his or her stumbles.

Consider the assigned fiction the same way. What is the author doing formally? (Can you describe it?) How are the basics of time, setting, and character limned in? What about more flexible elements, like theme? What makes this story unique? Is there a particular relationship (honest, unreliable, confiding, or something else) between author and reader? How is this achieved?

Please read the nonfiction pieces critically, too. You are not expected to agree with every point the authors make, though I hope you’ll find much of it interesting and useful. Feel free to note the points you affirm or contest.

III. CLASS PARTICIPATION

I encourage you to join in classroom discussions; a portion of your final grade is keyed to your participation. Occasionally I’ll ask that exercises be shared with the rest of the class, but if for some reason you’re uncomfortable reading your work aloud, just let me know.

When commenting on colleagues’ work, please be aware that there’s a human being beyond the page. Writers are natural egotists (and depressives), and most of us invest significantly in our work, even if we don’t pull off every attempt. At times it may feel necessary to tell someone a hard truth: a particular tactic isn’t working, the payoff is unsurprising, or a certain character strains
credulity. Please remember that at such times it behooves us to be precise and clear in our criticism and to avoid undue wounding once the point has been made.

Whether the news is good or bad, think before you speak. This is a mandate in all seminar courses, but it especially bears repeating in workshop, where initial impressions may require sorting out. A moment’s reflection will help you clarify your point, and speaking concisely will benefit both you and your listeners.

IV. ATTENDANCE

Because this class is interactive, absences are discouraged. Every writer needs readers, and each participant depends on the rest of the group for help and criticism.

If you miss a class, you remain responsible for all reading and writing assignments, and if you have work scheduled for submission, it’s still your duty to get it to me and your colleagues.

Emergencies, of course, are a different matter. If you are unable to fulfill your responsibilities due to a personal or family emergency, please contact me at your earliest convenience so we can accommodate everyone’s needs.

V. CLASSROOM DECORUM

I expect you to be on time to class and to pay attention during our sessions. If you need to leave the classroom for personal reasons, you may do so, but please minimize these interruptions. Each class session will include a short break midway through.

Electronic devices must be turned off during class. Do not step out of the room to make phone calls or conduct personal business.

VI. OFFICE HOURS

Feel free to schedule private conferences with me as needed. I’m happy to discuss your work, the mystery of writing in general or the world of literature, and I feel that in an advanced level course each student should meet with the instructor at least once. If my office hours are impossible for you, let me know, and we’ll work something else out. I do my best to be available to students, though I am generally not around on weekends. I’m also available to read rewrites and extracurricular work.

Note that I’m likely to mark up your manuscripts heavily—and despite much good will, I’m more likely to note problems than successes. It’s just my way. If my scribbled comments are not clear to you—or if I’ve inadvertently hurt your feelings, please do visit my office so I can explain my thoughts. It does neither of us any good if we’re not communicating!

VI. GRADES

Failure to complete assigned work will lower your grade. Responses to assigned readings will receive half credit if they are more than one week late, and responses to colleagues will receive no credit if they are more than a week late.

Again: the primary element in your grade will be the two pieces of workshopped fiction. Perhaps unfortunately, some assessment of ambition and native gifts may play a role here. Students whose work is careless or clichéd or who demonstrate no sensitivity to the music of the sentence may not be eligible for the top grade, even if they successfully complete all other work. Grading is never pleasant, but I feel this is a reasonable approach to an advanced level creative course. I do try to greet all student work with enthusiasm, interest and trust.
Meeting Schedule (subject to change)

**Wednesday, Sep 4**
Course introduction; instructor and student introductions; creation of schedule
Haruki Murakami, excerpt from “Sputnik Sweetheart”

**Wednesday, Sep 11**
John Gardner, “Basic Skills, Genre, and Fiction as Dream,” from *The Art of Fiction*
STUDENT WORK, cycle 1

**Wednesday, Sep 18**
Ali Smith, “True Short Story”
Etgar Keret, “Suddenly, a Knock on the Door” and “Lieland”
Exercise: Gardner’s barn
STUDENT WORK, cycle 1

**Wednesday, Sep 25**
Italo Calvino: “Quickness,” from *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*
STUDENT WORK, cycle 1

**Wednesday, Oct 2**
Alice Munro: “Oranges and Apples”
STUDENT WORK, cycle 1

**Wednesday, Oct 9**
Creation of submission schedule for 2nd cycle
Francine Prose: “Close Reading” from *Reading Like a Writer*
Exercise: Imagined character
STUDENT WORK, cycle 1

**Wednesday, Oct 16**
Exercise: Friendship
Gertrude Stein: “Susie Asado” and selections from *Tender Buttons*
Rick Moody: “Demonology”
STUDENT WORK, cycle 1
First public reading response due
Assessment of the term so far

**Wednesday, Oct 23**
James Wood: selections from *How Fiction Works*
Mary-Beth Hughes, “Horse”
STUDENT WORK, cycle 2

**Wednesday, Oct 30**
Jim Shepard: “Batting Against Castro”
Second response to a public reading due
STUDENT WORK, cycle 2

**Wednesday, Nov 6**
Annie Dillard, Chapter Three of *The Writing Life*; also “A Dream”
Exercise due: zip-zap-boing
STUDENT WORK, cycle 2

**Wednesday, Nov 13**
Angela Carter, “The Werewolf” and “The Company of Wolves”
Exercise: subtraction
STUDENT WORK, cycle 2
Wednesday, Nov 20
Readings TBD
Exercise: subtraction
STUDENT WORK, cycle 2

Wednesday, Nov 27 THANKSGIVING EVE
Meet or reschedule?
Umberto Eco: Paris Review Interview
Second response to a public reading due
STUDENT WORK, cycle 2

Wednesday, Dec 4
Edith Wharton “Roman Fever”
Wrap-up
Faculty evaluation forms
STUDENT WORK, cycle 2